

Reflections on Some Theologico-Ethical Norms for Prison Ministry: A Response

J. DARYL CHARLES

As one who is vocationally associated with an organization committed to prison ministry, I was fascinated by an essay appearing in a recent issue of the *Journal* (vol. 47, no. 2, 1992). In that essay the writer presents what he considers to be compelling insights for prison ministry that are to be gleaned from personalist behavioral theory and liberation theology. The author is to be commended for his desire to see prison ministry—certainly not a prime focus of traditional Christian ministry nor of essayists—move beyond “a weekly or monthly sermon or Bible study at the local jail or prison.” That the reader is reminded by the author of the inherent worth of the inmate in the sight of God is also meritorious. Divine redemption is indeed people-focused. Such is the movement of the Incarnation: God took the form of human likeness, humbled himself and became obedient—even to the point of death.

Early in his essay the author states an important truism that governs the development of his thesis: the serious Christian must be clear about his or her theologico-ethical assumptions and consider the attendant implications for prison ministry. We could not agree more. It is at the point of the author’s underlying presuppositions for “ministry,” however, that our agreement ceases.

The author initially credits his dependence on insights stemming from liberation theology as the basis for his approach to “ministry.” This approach, rooted in an African-American liberation perspective, we are told, is instructive as we reflect upon “the tragedy that is the American penal system and the general failure of professing Christian peoples and their institutions to respond with a sense

J. Daryl Charles, Ph.D. is scholar-in-residence with Prison Fellowship Ministries/The Wilberforce Forum.

of moral outrage and urgency both verbally and substantively."

In the mind of the author, the locus for the tragedy of the American criminal justice system, not surprisingly, is the fact that the majority of the prison population today consists of African-American males. The necessary conclusion for the author is that these individuals have been "marginalized"; the implicit assumption here is that "poor people" have been unjustly incarcerated, since God, unlike the penal system, is not a "respector of persons." Strangely, nowhere in the essay does the author interact with the "first things" of law, morality or criminal justice. Nor does he consider the events leading up to the incarceration of those imprisoned in the first place. With one sweeping inference, undergirded by sufficient "moral outrage," the author posits that these individuals suffer from a fate undeserved, that they are deprived of "equal rights" and thus, through a unique twist, qualify as candidates for the proverbial "preferential option."

Sadly, this intriguing essay suffers from several notable deficiencies. Chief among these are a failure to interact with even the most basic of criminal justice precepts and an uncritical espousal of a liberationist critique that transmutes Christian theology and genuine Christian ministry. It is not incidental that the author studiously avoids discussion of the fundamental principles of biblical ethics, from which the Christian interpreter/ethicist derives foundational notions of mercy, justice, guilt, repentance and restoration. For the liberationist, theology is routinely subordinated to economic and social analysis in the mythic quest for transforming society.

Prison ministry, of all varieties of social witness, is dependent on the insights and truths of historic Christianity that have withstood diverse social currents for nearly two millennia. Christian anthropology alone furnishes a basis for understanding human behavior and formulating an effective model for Christian social witness. To postulate a theory of "ministry" that not only neglects a clearly Christian approach to the human predicament but actively subverts the enduring foundations issuing from biblical theology, is to obliterate any possibility of truly helping the inmate. To be sure, we can acknowledge the right of all people, representing all points of view, to "minister" to the needs of America's prison population. Nevertheless, we acknowledge with unreserved conviction that any approach to "ministry" that is gelded of biblical theocentric, christological and anthropological truths is in fact no Christian ministry at all. Thus, we shall consider briefly the flaws of the "liberationist" perspective, to the extent that they fail to meet divine standards as regards the human predicament.

PRISON MINISTRY AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

Semantic Subterfuge

The primary defect of liberation theology lies in the way it proposes to alleviate the human plight. Without question, the project of seeking social justice in contemporary culture is one of supreme legitimacy. The paradigm for "ministry," however, that views political-economic-sociological status as normative, whereby the fashioning of a new trinitarian conception—race, gender, class (i.e., three errors in one)—supplants that of historic Christianity, is illegitimate, for it fails to be reconciled to the biblical foundations that undergird historic Christian faith. Unfortunately, liberation theology

(the genus of which is sociological and not theological) is inclined toward semantic manipulation. "Liberation," as contrasted with revolution, can be articulated so as to appear compatible with Christianity, particularly as it elevates the motif of "the poor and oppressed." The liberationist accent on "the poor and oppressed" reflects liberation theology's weakness in coming to terms with personal sin and individual moral accountability, since oppression is first of all an internal and spiritual matter. A flawed soteriology inevitably results in an equally flawed Christology, as well as a defective Christian practice. In the main, liberationists have followed Gustavo Gutierrez's imperative of deriving theology from social change instead of vice versa.

When liberationists speak of "the poor," they seem not to have all the poor in mind. Conspicuously absent in liberationist writings, for example, are needy groups that are as diverse as Laotian, Cambodian or Vietnamese emigres, Eastern Europeans, the many categories of the disabled, widows, or the unborn who are increasingly threatened in the womb. In American culture, the terminology *the oppressed* is normally reserved for certain—not all—blacks and women—specifically, those who do not espouse "conservative" political or religious views. Inasmuch as liberation theology embraces a radical—indeed, violent, if all other means fail—social upheaval, it hardly qualifies as bona fide Christian ministry—within the prison or without.

Hermeneutics and History

Moreover, liberation theology erroneously views the human predicament in terms of class struggle. In so doing, it imposes upon Christianity a Marxist/quasi-Marxist analysis of culture that calls for notably unchristian solutions. Because liberation theology reads the Bible through ideological lenses, it provides a religious front for a socio-economic agenda that is fueled by a long-entrenched modernist spirit. The twentieth century has been witness to the fact that as the so-called *Kulturprotestantismus* was progressively stripped of its theological integrity and credibility, it degenerated into a politico-economic enterprise. The relatively recent attempt to appeal to the Bible on behalf of "liberation" represents an attempt to reinfuse this program with divine sanction; hence, the invocation of a "theology" of liberation, in which politics and economics, not theology, act as the catalysts for social change.

Mainline Protestantism, without question, has suffered a fair measure of decline. As one sociologist observes, if it continues to decline, the reason will not be its reputed "prophetic ministry" (since much of this "prophecy" is geared toward educators, communicators and professional therapists). Nor will this decline be the result of "speaking truth to power"; rather, in the words of Peter Berger, it will be a case of "backing the wrong horse in a game of power politics."¹

Heretical as it surely might seem to the liberationist, there is no biblical basis, particularly in the New Covenant, for present political liberation as an integral aspect to the gospel. Rather, such is reflective of modern utopian constructs that fail to achieve biblical warrant. Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God was both imminent and future in its orientation. In his message, moreover, the Kingdom has a uniquely interior dimension. While Marxists and neo-Marxists share with Christianity an eschato-

logical hope, the two eschatologies are antithetical. At war are two philosophies of history—one is Marxist, the other is biblical. The pursuit in the present life of salvation via political and economic change constitutes not only extravagant fantasy, but also fails to nourish the spiritual hunger of the human soul. The result is a colossal deception that in the end breeds severe and debilitating disillusionment. Neo-Marxist sociologists are notoriously prone toward blind-spots as they conveniently ignore the rubble of twentieth-century societies that were built upon gargantuan myths. Rank-and-file parroting of this utopian fable in seminaries is notable.

The Christian gospel, in marked contrast to the currently fashionable politicized version, offers true liberation because it opens the eyes of faith to transcendent reality that is beyond history. Liberation theology, on the other hand, returns people to a yoke of slavery; it imprisons us to our own tragic projects within history. It minimizes at the very least—and, at worst, obliterates—God's redemptive actions that have taken place throughout history. Precisely because the Christian is grounded in a realm outside of politics and economics can he or she handle political and economic realities soberly, in addition to being an effective agent of reconciliation to other people who are still under a yoke of spiritual bondage.

In light of the fact that liberation theology ignores personal virtue while deifying political involvement as authentic faith, it violates a fundamental principle of biblical interpretation. The hermeneutical crux of evangelical biblical theology is Christological and not sociological. Ontological salvation does not turn on political salvation. The life and ministry of Jesus were not calls for mere socio-political justice. Nor were the political and economic fortunes of Palestine eased following Jesus' death. In contrast to liberationists, Christ did not advocate a forced replacing of existing institutions. Jesus was not a Zealot who sought to subvert the power structure of Rome. Contrarily, it was his contention, recorded in the Gospel narratives, that the power structures of the world owed their very existence to the Father; in fact, human redemption was achieved because of the Son's submission to the political structures, even though they exercised no inherent authority over him. The Apostle Paul was inclined to describe this phenomenon as the "deeper wisdom of God." As one theologian has observed, those who impose an updated and "relevant" interpretive scheme on the Bible are obligated to share in the ongoing process that destines their own program to inevitable replacement.²

CONCLUSION

The preceding observations in no way dispute the need for a robust application of scriptural principles as they bear upon human social need. Lasting alternatives, however, to social injustices such as one finds in the American penal system must necessarily be rooted in a biblical view of the human predicament as well as a biblical basis for Christian ministry. A refutation of the liberationist model of Jesus does not automatically mean a passive Christ; rather, it leads to the espousal of a truly dynamic evangelical alternative.

The church has received a divine mandate to perpetuate the biblical heritage. Christianity insists that revealed truth is universally normative—even in the prison

system—and not perspectival. In its eagerness to be relevant before a watching world, the church at times has obscured historic creedal commitments, tended to relativize truth-claims, unwittingly promoted secularism over the supernatural, and substituted activism for intellectual and spiritual rigor—all this in an hour when American culture is becoming increasingly balkanized, when education is sinking to ethical relativity and values-clarification, and when surrounding culture is growing increasingly intolerant of classical Christian thought.

Christian theologians, pastors, and lay persons, in bold contrast, should be demonstrating intellectual and theological credibility by exposing the cognitive and ethical weaknesses of flawed religious and naturalistic assumptions that ultimately come to lodge in the church's own understanding of its identity and ministry. Postmodern culture, contrary to its mindset, expresses but one particular era in a historical continuum; it possesses no ultimacy apart from a foundation of and infusion with biblical truth.

We often are reminded that "ideas have consequences." The twentieth century is a sober and continuing reminder of the tragic effects of "bad ideas"—many of which were implemented by "compassionate" progressives—that have visited contemporary societies. The solution to injustices in America's criminal justice system does not lie in the "radical discipleship" of the liberationist model; such an approach to "ministry," fueled by pseudo-salvations of social existence, can only lead to greater contemporary injustices.

The challenge for the Church is to apply a ministry model that is faithful to the Father, expresses itself in love for the Son, and is fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a model is rooted in the redemptive reality of the cross, and it avoids the temptation to dissolve the tensions between immanence and transcendence, holiness and love, freedom and responsibility, dignity and depravity. It is cognizant of the fact that an individual's worth derives not from his utility in the world nor in a politico-economic scheme that forever cries out for "marginalized" status; rather, it issues from his nature as a being created in the *imago Dei*. Moreover, the value of the individual is balanced by an equal concern for society collectively. Any ethic that takes biblical authority seriously will necessarily correlate the moral actions of the individual with the welfare and moral good of the community.

The biblical regard for social justice should impel the Christian community to a sustained and dynamic social witness in a way that brings to contemporary culture the moral transformation it so desperately needs. The American prison population has yet to feel the force of the Christian community that adopts such a truly "radical" approach to caring ministry.

NOTES

1. Peter Berger, *Different Gospels: Social Sources of Apostasy* (Rockford: The Rockford Institute, 1987) p. 8

2. Carl F.H. Henry, *Twilight of a great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester: Crossway, 1988) pp. 66-68

